

## [Brooklyn Streets]

Introductio to OLD TRADITIONS OF BROOKLYN STREETS by William Wood Tales-Traditions

This copy is written in essay form. If used I do not think that any introduction would be necessary or appropriate. A.M. Form C Folklore New York 10/17 [1970?] State New York Name of Worker William Wood Address 70-12 67th Place, Glendale, L.I. Date October 17, 1938 Subject [Odd Traditions of Brooklyn's Streets?] [Odd Traditions of Brooklyn's Streets?] As told to William Wood

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[Crazy Denton?]

Crazy Denton, so called because of his religious fervor, made a living in the 'Nineties by peddling fruit and vegetables from a wagon. Long Island farms supplied his stock, and the Bushwick section of Brooklyn furnished him with customers. Not all housewives were as fortunate as the good women who were privileged to buy from Mr. Denton. Besides giving his personal assurance that the goods were fresh and of the finest quality procurable, he pointed out to his lucky patrons those paths of rectitude which he believed would lead them to eternal joy in the hereafter. The eagerness which he displayed to fill their

(more) 2 mundane requirements was paralleled only by the solicitude he seemed to entertain for their spiritual needs. While emptying scoops of potatoes and beans into the aprons of his feminine admirers, in exchange for the money they handed him, he poured benedictions upon their heads with gratuitous and unstinted liberality. Denton did not believe in short measure, either in the dispensing of vegetables or blessings. The more thriving he found business to be, the greater and more diversified were the benisons he invoked. He queried his customers as to the state of their immortal souls

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in the same breath as he inquired about the replenishing of their kitchens. Godliness and fresh green groceries were praised with equal and or in sales talks that were as voluble as they were unique. Here is a typical monologue: "Good morning, Mrs. Jones! God bless you! I have the "nicest spinach you ever saw. Yes, five cents a pound; all "fresh. Thank you ma'am! Are you saved? How about "some nice wax beans, lady? Do you believe in Jesus? "These tomatoes are just off the vines. Remember, lady, Christ "died to save sin....yes! sure I'll pick you out good "ones. Come to Jesus, lady! I have some nice bananas. Are "you washed in the blood of the Lamb? Where can you "buy nicer green peas? Give your heart to the Lord! What's "the matter with them apples? No! there aint a rotten one "among them! These carrots are the best on the market... "He died on the cross to save you and me... four pounds "for fifteen cents. The Lord be with you! Come to Christ!" (more) 3 On Saturday nights, the zealous and inspired Denton used to demonstrate his gratitude for earthly favors by giving his week-day customers the benefit of his exposition of the scriptures; at least, those of them who had the sense of righteousness to listen to his open air sermons. Using the back end of his truck as a pulpit, he exhorted street-corner congregations to renounce the flesh and the Devil; to forsake the transitory pleasures of a wicked world; to turn from their evil ways; and to seek in all their fullness the rich blessings of the Christian life. Ah! Could but the story of Crazy Denton end here! Alas, for the frailties of human nature, and for the wily snares that Old Beelzebub sets to entrap the feet of poor sinners! Rumor had it that the venerable gent who fain would have converted the transgressor and who tried so hard to bring back into the fold those sheep that had gone astray....: yes, rumor had it that sometimes the self-appointed evangelist himself would step into one of the carefully laid gins of the Archenemy. It was noised around that Mr. Denton actually descended so far from grace as to indulge in periodical [?]; that while in his cups he very irreverently neglected his religion, and very carelessly abandoned his vegetables. Some of his more charitable customers would have ascribed these rumors to the malevolence of unscrupulous competitors, had it not been that after a few days' absence from his route, an odor not unsuggestive of strong waters was noticeable on Mr. Denton's breath. xxx (more) 4 [The Hundski Pickers?]

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The Hundski Pickers were a strange occupational group whose scattered membership plied their business in Brooklyn during the early years of the present century. Their calling was definitely unconnected with the harvest fields; nor was it related with the garnering of some strange genus of flora. In terms of to-day, it cannot be regarded as having been either an alluring or a romantic profession! It is not believed to have been especially lucrative. Admittedly [odoriferous?], the Hundski Pickers diffused a redolence in nowise suggestive of the autumn woods; and this is one of the reasons that persons of delicate sensitivity avoided rather than courted their society. Followers of this occupation were far from being prepossessing in general appearance and attire. Indeed, the very nature of the work they performed must have made unnecessary and superfluous any attempt at neatness of dress or cleanliness of person. Both sexes were engaged in the industry, and its women workers are said to have been little more attractive than the men. The public at large viewed the Hundski Pickers and the tasks they assumed with a feeling akin to loathing, despite the fact that a valuable service was being performed in the way of keeping the streets clean and the atmosphere less pungent. Although attended by many disadvantages, the craft was one of an independent nature; and each of its numerous 5 practitioners found solace in the knowledge that, as a rugged individualist, he was beholden to no petty foreman for the privilege of continuing to make a living. His hours of labor were not determined by, nor did the amount of his remuneration depend upon, a greedy and exacting employer. He was not ushered in to the scene of his occupational activities by the raucous screeching of a steam whistle. He punched no time clock. His financial gains were limited only by his own industriousness - and by the abundance of the product which he collected and sold. Every Hundski Picker conducted his own private enterprise. He sought out and found the coveted material in which he dealt, with all the persistency of a hunter stalking deer in the vast forest, or of a California miner seeking the golden treasure. A pair of alert and discerning eyes, a set of deft and nimble fingers, and a suitable receptacle to hold his captured trophies made up all the equipment necessary for a start in business. The Hundski Pickers' richest fields of exploration were those districts wherein the residents were lovers of dogs; the more canine pets, the greater the reward

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for labor. The principal theatres of operation were the gutters, the sidewalks, and those back yards which contained kennels. The objects of the quest were the deposits of organic matter extruded by the animals. With a dexterous motion, acquired by experience, the collector's hand would grasp each deposit and transfer it into the 6 can or box under his arm, or into the sack he carried over his shoulder. Many of these scavengers had regular routes; and, while competition appears to have been keen at times, there seems to have a "gentlemen's" agreement under which they usually refrained from encroaching on one another's territory. Pedestrians looked upon these people with unfeigned disgust. Even street urchins gave them as wide a berth as possible. To the eyes of older children they were an abomination. Conflicting rumors existed relative to the ultimate destination of the material thus gathered, and the use to which it was put. None of the reports that have come down to us can be regarded as absolutely authentic. It is quite likely that inquisitive persons of the period, who may have wished to ascertain the facts, were discouraged from making active investigation because of the obnoxious smells which issued from the dung-gatherers and the loads they bore. It would have required a great deal of endurance to follow one of them for any considerable distance. The consensus of opinion was that the material was purchased by a company who manufactured pills and powders. If this explanation was the correct one, it is evident that the popularity of the medicines was of short duration, for the Hundski Pickers vanished from the streets of Brooklyn as mysteriously as they had made their appearance. Their occupation passed into oblivion. xxx 7 [German Bands of Brooklyn?] A few strolling musicians, time-worn and bedraggled in appearance, are the only remaining heritages of those picturesque street players whose tuneful melodies once reverberated, through the far-flung areas of old Brooklyn. What resident of this City of Churches, whose memory antidotes the World War, cannot recall the German Bands? They were composed of instrumentalists numbering from six to a dozen men of various ages and artistic ability. Each group had their own special repertoires, as well as their peculiar uniforms which lent an air of distinction and color notwithstanding that, in many cases, these uniforms were ill-fitting and the worse for wear. The instruments on which they performed were of that sonorous type which interpreted

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so well the folk-tunes of the fatherland. The sax horn, tuba trombone and cornet were much in evidence; and when the band consisted of more than six players, the bass viol was considered to be an indispensable adjunct to the equipment of these music-makers. The flute, the clarinet, the oboe and other reed instruments were among the orchestral apparatus of the larger sized groups of itinerant bandsmen. Whenever one of these German Bands stopped at a street corner and struck up a popular tune, the children of the neighborhood would dance to the music. (more) 8 Occasionally, some impudent and mischievous urchin, eager to win the plaudits of his less daring playfellows, would provoke the indignation and wrath of the melodists by sucking a lemon under their very noses; this ungraceful gesture to indicate that the acrid juice of the fruit was a soothing anodyne with which to assuage the mental pangs inflicted by their discordant notes. Sometimes, the musicians accepted with resignation such affronts to their professional technique; but human nature has a limit to its endurance, even among people as aesthetic as those who composed the German Bands. Frequently it happened that a soulful trombone player would suddenly descend from the Orphean heights to which his own artistry had carried him; and, with expressions of anger unbecoming to the conduct of a virtuoso, he would give chase to his youthful tormentor for the distance of a city block. Seldom was the quarry out-distanced; and nearly always the offended genius made his breathless return to the street corner, unavenged. After two or three choice musical selections, deemed sufficient to arouse the emotional generosity of the audience, one of the bandsmen, rated more highly, perhaps, for business acumen than for rhythmic preeminence, would mingle with the assembled crowd, hat in hand, to receive the donations of inspired people. Offerings from the immediate bystanders were augmented by contributions of small change - often carefully wrapped in paper - thrown from upper story windows by appreciative and kind-hearted (more) 9 housewives of the vicinity. Having collected all the largess in sight, the recipient would count his cash; then, if he viewed as adequate the total amount, he would signal the maestro to express musicianly gratitude in a final rendition. It was customary for the personnel of these sidewalk bands to proceed after each concert to the nearest salon. There, the landlord or bartender usually dispensed free beers; and, if it were about meal

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time, the musicians would regale themselves with delectable morsels of pumpernickel and sausage so dear to the Teutonic palate. Many of the German Bands were composed solely of immigrants. Sometimes a whole group made their home in a single apartment, thus reducing to a minimum the cost of living. As has been shown, they received at least a goodly proportion of their food and beverage gratis. Perhaps it was tiresome to wander through the streets all day and in all kinds of weather, in search of a livelihood which, to say the least, must have been very uncertain. Yet, some of these musicians are said to have enjoyed excellent earnings, despite the humiliating character of their vacation and the unjust buffoonery and ridicule to which they were often subjected by the thoughtless and short-visioned people who nicknamed them "Beddle Buben" (beggar boys). Who, that remembers the days when Brooklyn's streets were resonant with spirited folk-times and entrancing, lovely melodies that touched the heart: who, that will (more) 10 have the temerity to compare them with the meaningless cacophony of Tin Pan Alley, shall say that the German Bands are not entitled to a distinguished place in the annals of Brooklyn's folklore? A typical repertoire included such numbers as: Ich Hatt' Einen Kameraden {Trinken Wir Noch Ein Tropfchen} {Aus Dem Kleinen Henkiltopfchen} Du, Du Liegt Mir In Herzen Die Lorelei Mariechen Weint Im Garten Die Wacht Am Rhein Ach, du Lieber Augustin Bubchen Hei Lie, Hei Lo [Brumer Tetrasus.?] Yetzt Yehen Mir Air Marl Mal 'Nuber

Wo Hast Du Die Schoenen Blauen Augen Hoehr?

Traumerei

Heinweh Danube Waltz Donay Waltzer

Barcarolle (From Tales Of Hoffman)

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# [Form D?] FOLKLORE NEW YORK [Extra Comment?] State New York Name of Worker William Wood Address 70-12 67th Place, Glendale, L. I., Date October 17, 1938 Subject

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[Odd Traditions of Brooklyn's Streets?] The notes from which I have written this article were gathered from a number of different sources. Portions of the data were acquired from intimate acquaintances; additional information was procured on park benches and street corners, and in been saloons. Several of the persons whom I contacted knew something about "Crazy Denton"; many remembered the "Hundski Pickers"; nearly all of them recalled the "German Bands." The article itself, "Odd Traditions of Brooklyn's Streets", forms a composite picture of the material thus gathered. I cannot give credit to [any?] one informant. My copy was almost finished at the time of the staff-meeting, October 14; so I am submitting it in the usual manner, despite some doubt of its fitness when considered in the light of Dr. Botkin's discussion on, and definitions of, folklore. Criticism will be welcome.

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